

# Middleborough Antiquarian

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VOLUME XXXII

WINTER-SPRING 1994

NUMBER 1



*The Soule School, 1902*



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# An appeal from the Middleborough Historical Association

As we go to press with this issue of the Middleborough Antiquarian, we are still without an Editor. We realize that the job of being an Editor is not an easy one, but the duties could be shared by a committee. Surely there must be someone who could offer an article now and then. We are grateful to Mr. & Mrs. Warren Whipple for their cooperation and efforts in this way. And we were so pleased to have the information and pictures about the Soule School from Mrs. Alberta Soule.

Now more than ever we realize how much our late Editor, Mertie Romaine, gave of herself to this publication over many years.

There is a wealth of history out there for us to draw on. Please help us keep the Antiquarian alive!

Sincerely,  
Robert M. Beals, President

## MIDDLEBOROUGH ANTIQUARIAN

Middleboro, Mass.

VOLUME XXXII WINTER-SPRING 1994 NUMBER 1

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# Colonial Middleboro - Part III

by Warren and Marion Whipple

(Third in a series of three articles on Middleboro during the colonial period.)

## III. The Transformation into an Industrial Town (c. 1730 - 1776)

As the 1600's drew to a close, the agricultural village of Middleberry was ready to change into the bustling industrial town of Middleborough.<sup>1</sup> The first pastor, the Rev. Fuller, had died; and after an unfortunate interval with Rev. Palmer, who was dismissed for intemperance, the First Church began two exceptional ministries under Rev. Peter Thacher, Jr. (1709-1744) and Rev. Sylvanus Conant (1745-1777). The Green was truly the center of town activities. Here Town Meetings were held in the church, the militia drilled on the mustering field, and a school was built. Although the Old Burial Hill (Nemasket Hill Cemetery) had been set apart in the first Purchase, now the "new" cemetery was started in the church yard as was the custom. In 1700 James Soule built a home that soon became the Sproat Tavern at the intersection of the five roads. The Green was a busy center.

Only a mile and a half away, on the Nemasket River, Peter Oliver of Boston was buying up land and river rights for a complex of mills that would eventually employ two hundred men and would establish the industrial atmosphere of the town. In addition to farming, there were now opportunities for storekeepers, lawyers, woodsmen, charcoal burners, tanners, drivers, inn keepers, and iron-mongers. Forges had sprung up along our many rivers, and bog iron was found in many locations, but especially in Lake Assawompsett. It was raked from the lake bottom using small boats. Each year the Town Meeting sold these ore rights and the herring fishing rights as a source of steady income for the town.

Great Britain had been lax in enforcing her trade laws, and had shut her eyes to smuggling, but in the 18th century policies changed. Middleborough was affected by the fact that iron was on the list of "enumerated articles" that could be sold only to or through England. Furthermore, it could only be refined into bricks that would be shipped to England, and there reworked into salable items of cooking pots and cannon balls, giving work to England's people. While this was an aggravation to our small forges, Judge Peter Oliver was such a high-ranking official — (Chief Justice of Mass. Bay Colony) that he had a special license to manufacture goods and military supplies. Thus he had a monopoly, shared only with the Winthrop foundry.

As people earned money, they began to build the comfortable "Cape Cod" houses, and also they built the stately two-story homes, both of which are common sights in town today. The Hoar house on Main Street in Lakeville is a good example of the two-story style. Weston's *History* has a picture of the

large Morton house on South Main Street that reportedly had a second floor dance hall and "guinea rooms" for slaves.

When did the first slaves come to town? We don't know. Obviously there was not disgrace attached to owning slaves, since the minister, Rev. Peter Thacher, had a slave named Sambo. Economically, only a few families could afford them, but the Olivers must have had quite a few as household servants and gardeners. At young Dr. Oliver's house, they slept in the attic, out of sight. Middleborough never had rows of cabins as the Southern plantations did.

Education had now become a necessity for many young men. Middleborough built a one-room school in each district. (After the Revolution our neighborhood schools quickly escalated to forty!) Enough girls were now being educated to provide many of our teachers. The school year was divided into quarters, and the teacher rotated around the four districts, boarding and teaching in each for three months. Lakeville eventually developed portable buildings that were moved by ox team wherever needed.

By the middle of the century, we had families who wanted to send their sons to college. In addition to Harvard (1636), New England also had Yale (1701) and Dartmouth (1769) within traveling distance.

Into this fast-growing town came George Whitefield (1746) to preach and to start a religious revival. The First Church too in 460 new members. The congregation had just built its third Meeting House. Now that the town was thriving, this building was done in the best Colonial tradition with a high pulpit and pews. The Hon. Peter Oliver, Esq. was one of the proprietors of the Meeting House, and was voted permission to build a special pew for his family and guests. Famous people would worship here in the next thirty years, mingling with the townspeople — such well-known names as Benjamin Franklin, James Bowdoin, Samuel Prince, Governor Hutchinson, and all of the high society of Boston. The church would play an important role in shaping our town's reaction to the American Revolution.

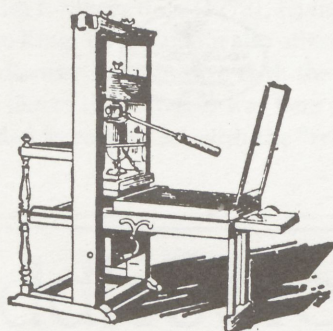
Meanwhile other congregations were starting their own church for the convenience of their neighborhood. The West Precinct (Lakeville) established its church in 1725, and this was followed by Halifax. The inhabitants of Titicut (North Middleboro) had repeatedly begged the General Court to make it a separate town or at least a precinct, claiming that it was a hardship to travel to the Green for services and businesses. About 1750 their wish for a meeting house was granted — to the



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consternation of the First Church, whose members didn't want to lose so many people. Three Indians from the Titicut reservation gave the land for the church and its cemetery, and Isaac Backus, a farmer and itinerant preacher who lived just down the street, was frequently asked to speak. His house still stands at #60 Plymouth Street.

During the Great Awakening that had been inspired by George Whitefield, many congregations were split into the "New Lights" and the "Old Lights" on such matters as infant baptism and closed versus open communion. Elder Backus, his wife, and four others withdrew from the Congregational Church to found a new Baptist (Separate) Church. Since this was not recognized as a Standing Church, he and his members were required to pay a religious tax or risk the loss of property and/or jail. Thus Elder Backus found himself concerned with the political issue of taxation in the growing conflict between the American colonies and England.



The British government needed to raise money to pay for the French and Indian Wars, and after consulting with Benjamin Franklin, who happened to be in London, Parliament passed a Stamp Act which required a tax to be paid on newspapers, pamphlets, and on all legal papers such as deeds, wills, contracts, and bills of sale. This was a *revenue* tax which many Americans felt was the exclusive right of their local assemblies, or as we later said, no (revenue) taxation without (direct) representation. Parliament could assess only *regulatory* taxes on empire business such as trade. Americans were enraged over this Stamp Act, feeling it interfered with their rights as Englishmen. While nine colonies were meeting in New York at the request of Massachusetts to draw up a Declaration of Rights and Grievances, a mob in Boston was vandalizing Lt. Gov. Hutchinson's home.

There must have been lively discussions held at the various taverns around town. Ebenezer Sproat owned the tavern on the Green where the members of First Church gathered to talk between services, and where Deborah Sampson listened to conversations as she did her weaving in the corner. Capt. Sproat had the temerity to hand out a tavern sign that proclaimed: "Entertainment for all sons of Liberty." As a businessman catering to the public, it was unusual for him to declare his political position so openly.

Concerning the Stamp Act, a Town Meeting was held at the Church at the Green to discuss the situation. Our delegate to the General Court at Boston was Daniel Oliver, son of the Judge. He was instructed that "we Look upon the aforementioned act to be a Greivous and Intolerable Burden upon us, and an infringement on our Charter Rights and Priveleges... and by all Lawfull means Consistent with Layalty To the King you oppose Its Talking Place Till we Can Know what will be the answer To the Prayers, Tears, Petitions of the whole Continent for Relief."<sup>2</sup> Everyone could sign this letter in good conscience while they waited for further developments.

Although Judge Oliver was American born and bred, he had risen to the top of the royal government in Massachusetts, and he remained loyal to King and Parliament throughout his life. Many of his workmen and neighbors must have been persuaded that such an important man knew best. In opposition to him, Zachariah Eddy and Rev. Conant, also important men in town, believed that England was abusing her colonial people, who still possessed the rights of Englishmen.

Tradition says that Judge Oliver and Zachariah Eddy held many lively political debates at the Sproat Tavern while each family in Middleborough was deciding which side to support. Some objected to the quartering of soldiers in private homes, some objected to revenue taxes without direct representation, and some complained about the manufacturing and trade regulations. Others remembered with bitterness that England had returned the Fortress of Louisburg to France in a deal for land in India, and had given Ohio to the recently conquered Quebec. Some Americans were new immigrants from other countries who felt no loyalty to the British Empire anyhow, while many others had family traditions and relatives that bound them to the mother country.

Our first open act of defiance was the decision taken in Town Meeting (1767) to make our own paper. As one of the materials controlled by the Manufacturing Act, the right to make paper was legally reserved for the Mother Country.

The Stamp Act was repealed, but it had started the movement to divide the colonists into Whigs and Tories. Other acts followed to widen the breach. The Townshend Duties, which looked like trade taxes but were in reality revenue taxes, and the Boston "Massacre" in which five people died, kept the issues alive. Our own Chief Justice Peter Oliver presided at the trial of the soldiers accused of starting the shooting at the "massacre."

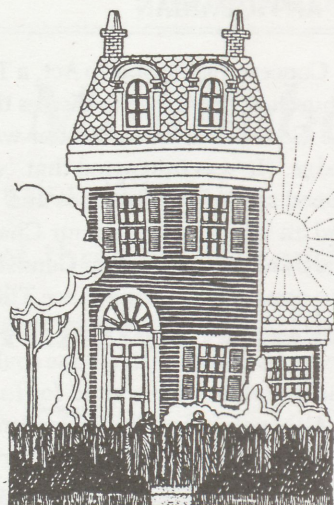
Meanwhile, the Olivers continued to entertain lavishly at their mansion — perhaps the most handsome home and grounds in New England. In 1770, when Peter, Jr. married the governor's daughter, the family had a suitable estate with gardens built for the young couple down the river from the mills. This home is still standing, and once again is owned by descendants of the Judge's brother. Across the street, James Bowdoin owned another fine home, and he invested heavily in the Oliver mills. All this social grandeur and financial opulence made Middleborough an important town.

When more troops arrived in Boston to control that city after the riot of the "Massacre," Middleborough sent Capt. Ebenezer Sproat and Capt. Benjamin White to a meeting in Fanueil Hall

(Continued on Page 7)



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from  
home



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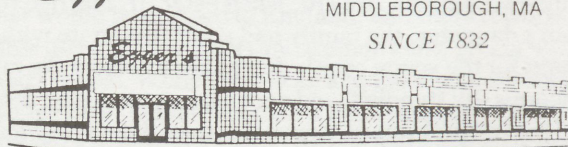
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## The Transformation . . .

concerning the quartering of troops in private homes. At the same time all churches in our town were notified that next Tuesday would be a "day of solemn fasting and prayer." Englishmen had a strong tradition that a "man's home is his castle," and soldiers not only could spy on their host family, they usurped the best bedroom, and had to be fed breakfast and supper at the family's expense.

Samuel Adams tried to unify the colonial cause by establishing Committees of Correspondence from Maine to Georgia. Middleborough dragged her feet on this move, and took two years before voting that the selectmen should be our committee to communicate with other towns. With the powerful Judge Oliver employing so many men, it was to be expected that the town would remain loyal to King and Parliament, but at the same time the minister and the tavern keeper were speaking out boldly for "liberty." Obviously the Town Meeting was attempting to remain neutral. Young Dr. Oliver entertained Benjamin Franklin for three days (1773), trying to influence him to support the King. Dr. Franklin also attended Rev. Conant's church and discussed agriculture with the patrons at Sproat Tavern. We like to think that it was here in Middleborough that he decided to cast his lot with the "rebels."

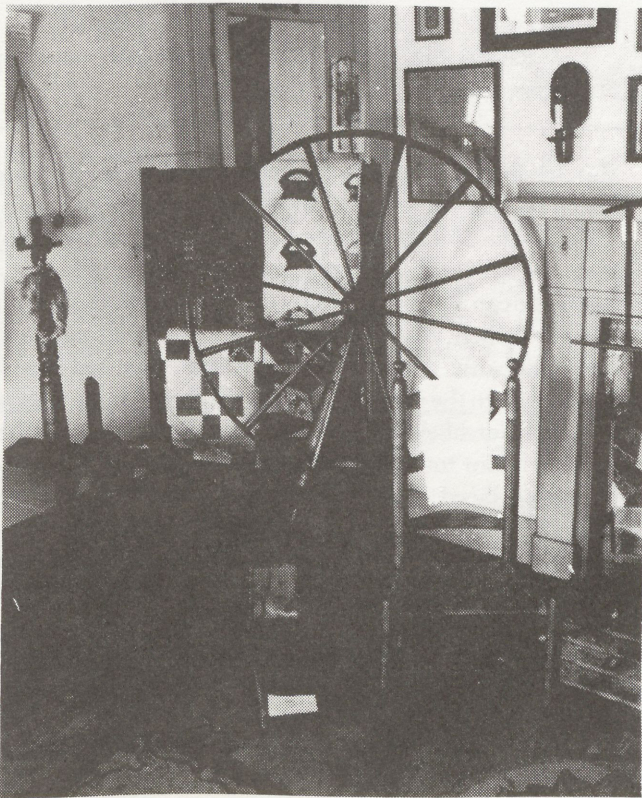
The Boston Tea Party brought the debate to a climax. The punishments inflicted on Boston aroused America as no other event had. Middleborough sent Abner King, Tory, and Zachariah Eddy, Whig, to the meeting of the General Court held in Salem with instructions to move with caution to maintain good government. Also, the town sent a letter of sympathy and eighty bushels of grain to the starving city of Boston.

The First Continental Congress, attended by all the colonies except Georgia, met at Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia on Sept. 5, 1774. Elder Backus of North Middleborough packed some of his books in his saddlebag to sell along the way to pay for his travel expenses, and set off for Philadelphia to represent the Separate Baptists who were opposed to religious taxes. He failed to convince the Massachusetts delegates (John and Sam Adams, Robert Treat Paine, and Thomas Cushing) that this touchy subject should be added to America's list of complaints, but Elder Backus worked for the rest of his life to have freedom of religion included in the State constitution and the national Bill of Rights.

The Congress sent a letter to King and Parliament asking that all laws be rescinded back to 1763 (end of the French and Indian Wars) to give both England and America a new start based on a better understanding of their respective viewpoints. They also adopted an embargo against all trade with England. Com-

*(Continued on Page 8)*

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# The Tom Thumb Mansion, Bridgeport, Connecticut

by Gladys M. Beals

Soon after returning from this first trip to Europe with P. T. Barnum, General Tom Thumb had amassed such a fortune that he and his parents built a magnificent home in Bridgeport, Connecticut, at 956 North Avenue, where the Strattons lived for the rest of their lives. Tom stayed there whenever he was in Bridgeport, to rest between tours or other business.

The first and second floors were built for Tom's parents. The third floor was built and furnished to accommodate his tiny form. After he and Lavinia Warren were married, they spent some of their time there.

The rooms were big and the ceilings high, as they were in most large mansions of the day. In every other respect, the third floor was like an elegant doll house. The window sills, doors knobs, cupboards, counters and fixtures, all were built so low that a normal sized person would have had to bend almost double to reach them. To the General and Lavinia, 36 inches and 32 inches tall respectively, they were "just right." The grounds were surrounded by an iron fence.

The couple spent very little time there after they built the Tom Thumb mansion in Middleboro, Mass. Here they retreated between tours and for rest periods. From the time on, — this was their "haven," — their prime residence.

After Tom's death in 1883, Lavinia sold the mansion in Bridgeport. Eventually it was remodeled into a regular home, and in later years became hemmed in by several business establishments. The history of the famous tiny tenants was almost forgotten. Several years later, a florist shop was built in the front yard.

In early 1953, the property was sold and the building razed



*TOM THUMB'S HOUSE, which he built after visiting Queen Victoria, was torn down for parking area. It was located at 956 North Avenue in Bridgeport.*

to make way for a drive-in bank and a parking lot.

Thus ended the years of the Tom Thumb mansions in Bridgeport, Conn.

## The Transformation . . .

mittees in every country and town were to enforce the embargo. Then Congress adjourned until May, facing a long winter of waiting for an answer, knowing that the militia units would be training in earnest in case they were needed. Some towns suffered acts of violence that winter, with rioting and tarring-and-feathering. Middleborough remained outwardly calm while tensions grew dangerously strong. A Liberty Pole was raised at the Green. The annual Training Day must have been a nervous time for everyone. Middleborough, with a population of over 4,000 now, had four militia precincts, and made each district responsible for having its men and ammunition ready. When would these militiamen be called upon to fight for their beliefs, and which side would each man support? Rev. Conant performed the installation service (Oct. 1774) for the new officers and presented them with the pikes. He was standing under the Liberty Pole as he prayed and preached for liberty. This appears to be the first public demonstration that

Middleborough had made its choice. Judge Oliver had already fled to Boston to live under the protection of the British army.

Before the Second Continental Congress could assemble in May, the battles of Lexington and Concord were fought, and the American Revolution had started. The militia were now the minutemen, ready to respond at a moment's notice to defend their cause. About one hundred men marched from Middleborough to the defense of Bunker Hill, and three companies occupied Marshfield to prevent a Tory take-over there. The few families in our town that still remained loyal to King George III were placed under home arrest. Soon the issue would change from the question of our colonial rights to the move for complete independence from Great Britain. After one hundred years, the British flag would no longer fly over Middleborough.

<sup>1</sup> For twenty years the town was called Middleberry. Gradually the name changed to Middleborough, which form was used exclusively after 1700.

<sup>2</sup> Weston, *History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts*, p. 107.





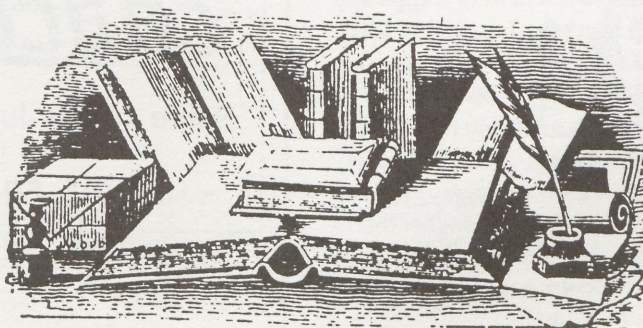
## The Soule School

The Soule School was located on Winter Street in the East Middleboro section of town. The name "Soule" school was derived from the fact that this was the Soule neighborhood where many families of that name resided.

The building was constructed probably in the early or mid-1800's and was discontinued as a school in 1902. The school teacher, pictured at the right, was the late Miss Carrie

Soule. Seated, second from right in the front row, is the late Albert F. Soule, who became a very popular and well-respected citizen of this town.

The Middleborough Historical Association is indebted to his widow, Mrs. Alberta Soule, for the use of this information and picture, and the cover picture, so that they could be included in this issue of the "Antiquarian."







WALTER SAMPSON  
1862 - 1931

## An Outstanding Educator

Walter Sampson was born on the family farm on Highland Road in Lakeville, December 13, 1862. He attended early school near his home, and later was a student at the Pierce Academy in Middleboro. In 1880, he entered the local high school and finished the four-year course in two years. During his attendance at high school, he walked back and forth daily between the school and the farm, a distance of fourteen miles.

He entered Dartmouth College in 1882, and was considered an outstanding student. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and had three degrees conferred upon him. On January 3, 1883, he married Miss Emma Stevens of Lyndon, Vermont. He was principal of the Academy at Lyndon from 1886-1890.

In the latter year, the Sampsons came to Middleboro and he served as principal of the high school until 1923, over thirty years. Under his leadership, the school grew and every year sent graduates to various colleges and other schools of higher learning throughout the country. When the new Memorial High School was built in 1926, the auditorium was appropriately named the "Walter Sampson Auditorium."

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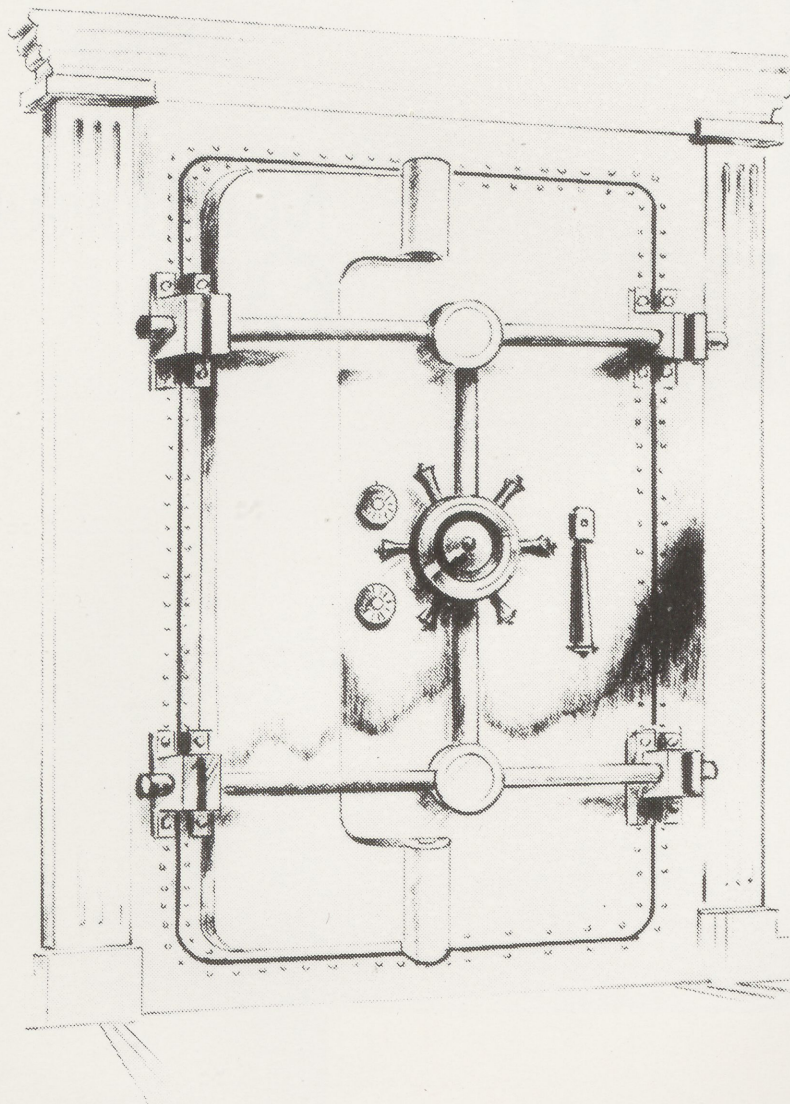
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